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## → Fall 2001 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar.

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

Submissions are due in 159 Goldwin Smith by **Wednesday, December 19**. No exceptions can be made. The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

## → Fall 2001 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application

Instructor's name Sarah J. Heidt SJH18

Department English

Course title From Frankenstein to Dracula

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my essay, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize.

Better Writing Through Wallowing

title of assignment sequence

Instructor's signature

S. J. Heidt

Date

18 December 2001

Fall 2001 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application  
**Better Writing Through Wallowing**

English 187 From *Frankenstein* to *Dracula*: Turning Literature into Legend  
Sarah J. Heidt, Department of English

In October 1998, midway through my first semester of teaching in the Knight Institute, my grandfather died. The students in my Mystery Stories seminar had just completed a sequence of writing assignments about Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*; we were reading Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* and were about to screen *L. A. Confidential*. When I received news of my grandfather's death, I was in the midst of designing their next assignment, through which I hoped both to continue building on their strengths in deploying textual details and also to combat their difficulties with building strong arguments from those textual details, as well as, more broadly, with thinking independently and trusting their critical instincts. Too often in the semester's early weeks, I had been flummoxed by my students' desire to know what I wanted them to think or argue in any given assignment. While I could certainly understand their desire to comprehend an assignment's requirements fully, I feared that the question, "What do you want from us?" had less to do with double-checking such requirements than it did with my students' hopes of conforming as closely as possible to a vision of their work which they believed I had already formulated when I handed out each assignment. And, I reasoned, perhaps they weren't entirely wrong in sensing some pre-formulated visions on my part. After all, I *did* have strong ideas about what would constitute effective responses to my assignments, and I was teaching for the first time. Perhaps, without meaning to do so, I was communicating to my students that the only valid ideas about how to complete writing assignments for English 147 were my own ideas—that, in other words, I was harboring inflexible hidden agendas for their work.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, and I had been mulling over possible remedies for this problem for some time when I learned that I would need to fly to Detroit for my grandfather's funeral. Faced with the need to produce a writing assignment in the two days before my departure, I reflected on the aims of my course—my big-picture hopes and dreams for how my course would benefit my students in the future—and found my thinking swiftly clarified. I considered the dramatic difference between the carefully rationalized writing assignments that the Knight Institute had trained me to craft and the often vaguely constructed

assignments I had often received when I was in college. I thought about the kinds of writing tasks, some only implicitly assigned, which my students would face both at Cornell and in graduate school or the workplace. And I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I would design an assignment sequence whose range of options demonstrated, without room for doubt, that no hidden agenda lay behind my exhortations that my students be intellectually daring, creative, and curious; in requiring that my students take a more independent stance toward developing their intellectual work, this assignment sequence would also seek to equip them for dealing with vague and/or open-ended writing tasks in the future.

Believing, in other words, that my students would benefit from guided experience in turning vague assignments into critical and creative opportunities, I began designing this sequence by creating an open-ended and fairly vague essay assignment, one which simply instructed my students to write six to eight pages about some specific aspect of two of the Los Angeles mysteries we had read and/or viewed. I embedded this open-ended assignment within the instructions for a topic proposal assignment, within whose bounds I encouraged my students to think broadly and messily, using free-writing and brainstorming techniques, as well as a series of targeted post-brainstorming questions, to consider the full range of options afforded to them by the openness of the vague assignment.

As I had hoped would be the case, when I returned from Detroit, my students had begun submitting their topic proposals—and those topic proposals covered a far wider and more interesting range of connections and ideas than I could have cooked up for them to explore, had I simply composed a group of essay questions about the course's hard-boiled mysteries. In fulfilling their own topic proposals, my students crafted essays which were stronger in every way than their previous essays had been. I decided to use this assignment sequence in the future whenever appropriate. In the end, in fact, it has provided an effective conclusion for each of the writing seminars I have taught in the Knight Institute, including my Fall 2001 seminar English 187: From *Frankenstein* to *Dracula*. In each semester, this sequence has given my students seemingly paradoxical guidance in developing the increased intellectual independence that is my course's most important goal.

When I designed From *Frankenstein* to *Dracula* for the English department's Shin Fellowship competition in Spring 2000, I envisioned the course's culminating in a proposal and short research paper which would allow my students to explore some facet of the course in



depth. Based on my previous experiences with this proposal / final essay sequence, I had no doubt that students in From *Frankenstein* to *Dracula* would propose and tackle a wide range of complicated and richly interesting topics, since the goals of English 187 were, themselves, more complex than the goals of my Mystery Stories and Twentieth-Century Autobiography courses had been in 1998-2000. Because I organized the course to focus both on nineteenth-century fictional works and also on nineteenth- and twentieth-century transformations of those works, students in my course would ultimately consider not only Romantic and Victorian literary-historical contexts but also more recent American popular cultural artifacts. In the end, I hoped, my students would feel that the course had opened up—though, due to obvious time constraints, not necessarily pursued—numerous avenues for wide-ranging exploration. The final essay sequence would give my students a chance to identify and explore just one of those avenues—and, in turn, would afford them the opportunity to consider how they might explore more of the course's loose ends or suggestive connections on their own in the future.

By the time we reached the Essay 5 / Essay 6 sequence, my class had covered a wide range of writing concepts, chiefly relating to structuring an essay, as well as one's writing process and time. From the beginning of the semester, I eschewed essay questions altogether, instead drawing my students' attention to crucial concepts or issues related to each course text and then guiding them in the process of identifying and exploring their particular interests and investments in those concepts, issues, and texts. Early writing assignments required my students to test provisional theories by first identifying pertinent passages of our course texts and then turning those passages into evidence for the theses which that evidence, in turn, allowed them to refine. As the semester progressed, we focused especially on building sharp, argumentative theses and on crafting focused and coherent paragraphs relating clearly to those theses.

By early November, when this assignment sequence began, we had already worked through Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and a handful of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (1891-1903); the day I distributed the Essay 5 assignment sheet, we began our month-long reading of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Along the way, we had screened James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931); studied reprints of *Frankenstein's* manuscript and of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, the manuscript predecessor of *Alice's*

*Adventures in Wonderland*, and visited Kroch Library to view early editions of our course texts, as well as contextual materials like Charles Booth's *Descriptive Map of London Poverty* (1889). During class discussions of each of our course texts, we had also identified a range of those texts' transformations, taking briefly into our purview everything from Count Chocula cereal to *The Matrix*'s use of the "White Rabbit" to Mel Brooks's revision of James Whale's *Frankenstein* films.

I encouraged my students to use Essay 5 as a way of reviewing the course by thinking about the texts and issues which had most engaged them since the beginning of the semester. To aid their reflection, I distributed a list of selected cinematic and dramatic revisions of our course texts, suggested that the class consider the contextual material appended to our course texts in the Broadview editions we used this semester, and reminded them of the range of pop cultural references that had arisen during earlier class discussions. Because my students had known about the final essay sequence since the first week of classes, many of them had also taken my frequently offered advice and kept running lists of topics and questions upon which they could draw in crafting Essay 5.

My students first produced a rough draft of the topic proposal assignment, whose main goal was to give them space, time, and support for their development as independent and daring thinkers and writers. In past semesters, I have required only a final draft of the topic proposal assignment, followed by the second of my students' required conferences for the semester and then by their final essays. This semester, I decided to back up with actions my oft-employed rhetoric of being patient with developing ideas: I incorporated a revision of the topic proposal, in the hopes that my students would feel less pressured to reach certainty about their essay topics in the earliest stage of the design and writing process. I encouraged my students to describe multiple essay topics in their drafts of Essay 5, if they were still trying to decide among topics. I also encouraged them to think expansively, rather than to try to zero in immediately on essay topics which seemed safe. Since my students knew that they would conference with me early in the week following their submission of Essay 5's rough draft, they also felt free to pose questions about the feasibility of any facet of their proposed topics. In order to encourage my students to think of these versions of Essay 5 as works in progress, I allowed e-mail submission of this assignment. In the end, I hoped that they, like my students in previous semesters, would find Essay 5 intellectually stimulating and liberating, if a bit bewildering.

When I first designed the Essay 5 assignment sheet in Fall 1998, I faced the challenge of directing my students to seek out their own interests without dictating those interests to them. I also sought to create a resource to which my students could turn in future semesters if they found themselves faced with an open-ended assignment and needed to brainstorm or free-write their ways to essay topics. One of the first students to complete this assignment in 1998 referred to the activities and questions outlined in Essay 5 as “that Jedi follow-your-instincts stuff”—“stuff” of which he was initially skeptical but to which he warmed up as it led him to a final essay with which he was deservedly satisfied. In my Mystery Stories seminars, my students were keeping journals, and many of them used these journals as the venues for the brainstorming which led to Essay 5; this semester, since I did not require journals of my students, I simply left them to their own devices at the earliest “wallowing” stages of the assignment sequence.

The assignment sheet for Essay 5 has gone largely unchanged since Fall 1998, though I have made slight modifications as necessary to adapt the assignment to particular courses and students. This semester, for instance, I removed one modification I had made to this essay assignment sequence in Spring 1999, the second semester in which I used it. In both my Spring 1999 Mystery Stories and Spring 2000 Twentieth-Century Autobiography courses, I encouraged my students to consider alternative formats for their final essays—to break out of the standard forms of critical academic writing. That encouragement led to some intriguing essays and would have been just as appropriate in *From Frankenstein to Dracula* as it was in those earlier seminars. However, since my English 187 students seemed to have developed less proficiency in the basics of critical academic writing over the course of the semester, and since their proposed topics were already likely to involve textual materials not discussed within the course and, consequently, a higher degree of complexity than my previous students’ topics, I decided to simplify the sequence by eliminating this extra “creative” option. However, this elimination did not stop my strongest writer from proposing and executing an excellent final essay discussing *Dracula* and the 1992 film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* from Stoker’s perspective, as far as her research into his composition of and relation to *Dracula* allowed her to ascertain that admittedly anachronistic perspective.

## **“Essay” #5: Wallowing Your Way to a Topic**

Chances are good that, at some point in your Cornell career, you’ll receive an essay assignment which reads as follows:

**Essay #6: Write six to eight pages exploring a productive connection between at least two texts you’ve read and/or viewed in connection with this course. Due December 7.**

Such an assignment can afford you a great deal of intellectual freedom, since it offers nearly unlimited territory within which your curiosity can roam. However, this kind of assignment also presents you with the challenge of transcending its own vagueness. When faced with such open-ended directions, where and how should you begin to carve out a specific area of exploration? This course’s final sequence of writing, comprised of “Essay” #5 and Essay #6 (above), will allow you not only to identify and explore a question or issue which intrigues you at the end of a semester spent studying nineteenth-century fictions but also to practice the very process of developing a viable and productive writing topic.

“Essay” #5 should strike you as being slightly different from any of the essays you’ve done this semester, because part of its intention is to force you to write your way to an essay topic and, in turn, a writing project about whose parameters and/or details you may not be entirely certain right now. At some point in your lives, and probably even at some point in your Cornell careers, most of you will be required to produce a piece of speculative writing like this one—a piece of writing which has to be crafted before all the data are in, or which needs to make connections between ideas that are not necessarily fully developed yet, or which must suggest possible avenues of exploration or areas of limitation, even as you know that your ideas might change with continued research and thought.

The work you hand in for Essay #5 should by nature be provisional, since Essay #5 is, first and foremost, a chance for you to **play around** with the ideas and connections which will make up your argument in Essay #6. You should feel free to use Essay #5 to pose questions you’d like to explore—and, if appropriate, to propose some answers to those questions. **You should also feel free to be a bit messy and confused at this point.** If you see a possible problem with or limit to your idea, indicate that you know about it, even if you don’t know what to do about it. Similarly, if you have an idea that seems intriguing to you but that you don’t know how to handle, bring it into your topic proposal. If you can, suggest what you *might* do with potential problems or focal points. We can discuss these potential problems and focal points during conferences next week.

Be confident in your experimentation and your messiness! Your goal in writing Essay #5 should be open, creative exploration. I want you to dare to be intellectually curious, to find the thing(s) that this class has left you wanting to explore and to start to put your finger on it or them, even if you know you won’t quite be able to figure out all of your ideas until the essay is due. **Wallow in ideas until you find the one(s) most interesting for you—the exciting idea(s) worth writing about** that will help you turn the impossibly broad assignment for Essay #6 into an opportunity to follow your inclinations and to show off your curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking and writing skills.

In the following pages are suggestions for wallowing productively (see also your *New St. Martin’s Handbook*, pp. 32-38, for tips on brainstorming and forming a topic).



- ⇒ **Think back, and think broadly. What has most intrigued you in our course readings and writings? Which text(s) have you most enjoyed reading or found most interesting? What films have you found most intriguing? (You should also feel free to consider writing about films that we have not watched as a class.)**

At this stage, shut off the critic or censor in the back of your mind. Be patient with yourself and trust your instincts. This stage of topic design should take some careful, quiet, and concentration-laden time. For at least twenty uninterrupted, quiet minutes, brainstorm or freewrite or make notes about

- ◆ issues?
- ◆ themes?
- ◆ situations?
- ◆ characters or kinds of characters?
- ◆ and so on...

that have seemed most noteworthy, interesting, or perplexing to you as we've read these nineteenth-century fictions and watched (or talked generally about) twentieth-century transformations of them. Spend time getting your initial thoughts out on paper. If those thoughts start to run dry, start mining our course texts (including their appendices...), your notes, and/or your earlier course writings. Your goal during this exercise should be to keep writing or typing up ideas—and to keep yourself from criticizing them prematurely!

Remember that sometimes seemingly insignificant details or ideas (whether from literary or cinematic works, from class discussion or your own thinking) can become more and more crucial, the more you consider them.

- ⇒ **You may also find it useful to review previous essay assignments, discussion questions, and response paper topics, to refresh your memory regarding the kinds of issues we have discussed and written about this semester.**

Anything we've discussed in class or written about this semester is fair game. For instance, our discussions of course texts have led us into questions about the role and depiction of science, presentations of masculinity and femininity, the formation of identity (and fantastic or nightmarish versions of identity-formation), the representation of travel, the role of setting (especially, in later assignments, of urban settings), and the construction of narrative and the role of narrative forms—and the list could go on!

- ⇒ **Now consider what you've come up with so far, by way of brainstormed/listed/sketched ideas. Among the questions you should ask yourself at this point:**

- ◆ What are my favorite ideas or questions so far?
- ◆ Where are patterns of interest or thought emerging in my notes?
- ◆ What sorts of connections can I make among my ideas?
- ◆ Which texts or personal experiences am I most drawn towards?
- ◆ About which texts (and/or their sources, contexts, or transformations) do I want to know or think more?

At this point, if you find a theme or issue in one text that seems particularly exciting, you may want think about whether that theme/issue functions in any of the other works we've studied, or about whether you'd like to focus on that text and one or more of its cinematic or dramatic transformations—or even on that text and one or more of its sources or cultural/historical contexts, as presented in the appendices of our course texts (with the exception of the Sherlock Holmes stories).

- ⇒ **Once you've identified a potential topic of interest (including a set of texts you'd like to explore), consider the possible range of that topic. What subtopics might you need/want to address? Where might your exploration and/or argument encounter tricky spots? What pieces of evidence might figure prominently in your argument?**
- ⇒ **At this point, you're ready to write Essay #5, which at the very least should present the following information about your topic (though you should not feel obligated to present it in this order):**
  - ◆ **What your provisional topic is—at this point, you can write it as a statement or as a question (or as a series of statements or questions).**
  - ◆ **Any background information you consider crucial to my understanding of the development of your provisional topic and your thinking about that topic. Why does the question/issue/connection upon which you've decided strike you as being worth 6-8 pages of your thinking and writing?**
  - ◆ **Which texts (whether literary, contextual, or cinematic/dramatic) you currently plan to examine, and why.**
  - ◆ **What potential problems or promise you anticipate for your topic. If you have a "hunch," state/explain it—especially if you're getting that hunch from a particular text or issue that you can indicate as a starting place for your thinking. If you have concerns, write about them, as well.**

Again, the purpose of Essay #5 is to force you to start thinking and writing about Essay #6 even before you may actually feel ready to think and write about it. Generally, you may never be (or at least feel) fully ready to write, but it's important to learn how to write coherently and persuasively anyhow. Consider this assignment as an opportunity to develop and practice valuable speculative writing skills—as well as to use your speculative writing as a way to focus your thinking about this course and the materials we've explored in it.

Essay #5 should be something like a sketch, or an artist's study—rough, perhaps even unfinished-feeling, but valuable and promising nonetheless.

*Your 2-3 page Essay #5 is due by e-mail (either as an attachment or within the body of an e-mail, addressed to [sjh18@cornell.edu](mailto:sjh18@cornell.edu)) before the end of the day on Friday, November 9.*



## Selected Dramatic or Cinematic Versions of ENGL 187 Fictions

### **Frankenstein**

- Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823) – Richard Brinsley Peake (see me)  
*Frankenstein* (1931) – Dir. James Whale URIS video 950  
*Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) – Dir. James Whale URIS Reserve 1919  
*Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) – Dir. Charles Barton  
*Teenage Frankenstein* (1957) – Dir. Herbert Strock  
*Young Frankenstein* (1974) – Dir. Mel Brooks  
*Blade Runner* (1982) – Dir. Ridley Scott [a loose adaptation] URIS Reserve 2062  
*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) – Dir. Kenneth Branagh URIS video 1903  
*Gods and Monsters* (1998) – Dir. Bill Condon URIS video 2029  
[A film about James Whale, who directed *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*]

### **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**

- Alice in Wonderland* (1951) – Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske  
*Dreamchild* (1985) – Dir. Gavin Miller [Currently at Cornell on ILL in my name]  
[A semi-factual film about Alice Hargreaves (the grown-up Alice) and her journey to New York City to receive an honorary degree from Columbia University in 1932; features creatures from Jim Henson's Creature Shop—worth a look.]  
*Alice in Wonderland* (1999) – Dir. Nick Willing (made for TV)

### **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**

- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) – Dir. John S. Robertson  
*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) – Dir. Rouben Mamoulian URIS Reserve VZZ 124  
*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) – Dir. Victor Fleming  
*Jekyll and Hyde: The Musical* (1994) [Orig. Broadway Cast] Music Library CD 6976  
*Mary Reilly* (1996) – Dir. Stephen Frears  
[Based on Valerie Martin's 1990 novel (available in Olin Library, PS3563.A78913 M2)]

### **Sherlock Holmes**

- Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939) – Dir. Alfred L. Werker  
*The Seven Per-Cent Solution* (1976) – Dir. Herbert Ross  
*Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985) – Dir. Barry Levinson  
The Granada Television Sherlock Holmes series (1985-1996) – with Jeremy Brett

### **Dracula**

- Nosferatu* (1922) – Dir. F. W. Murnau URIS video 293  
*Dracula* (1931) – Dir. Tod Browning  
*Dracula* (1931) – Dir. George Melford  
[Spanish-language version of *Dracula* shot contemporaneously with Browning's film]  
*The Horror of Dracula* (1958) – Dir. Terence Fisher  
*Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) – Dir. Francis Ford Coppola  
*Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) – Dir. E. E. Merhige  
[A film speculating about the making of the 1922 silent film *Nosferatu* (or, rather, about the identity of Max Schreck, who played the film's vampire).]

I received my students' drafts of Essay 5 on November 9 and sent them my initial responses to their topic proposals via e-mail, in order to maximize the productivity of our conferences on November 12-14. When I designed my syllabus, I scheduled my students' second twenty-minute conference of the semester to fall between the rough and final drafts of Essay 5 so that I could devote these conferences to discussing the students' topic proposals, allowing each student to respond to my e-mailed suggestions and offering further suggestions of my own. I also used these conferences to explain the tasks involved in revising Essay 5. Because one of these tasks was to set writing goals, I was able to discuss with each writer his or her strengths, weaknesses, and overall development during the course within the specific context of helping him or her prepare for revising Essay 5, as well as for producing Essay 6.

Following their conferences with me, my students revised their Essays 5 in order to finalize their topics, set their writing goals, and craft timetables for their final essays. I included writing goals and timetables in the Essay 5 / Essay 6 sequence for the first time this semester. In past semesters, when my students have organized final portfolios of their writings, I have required them to write self-assessments of their course writings as a whole. One element of these self-assessments has been a statement of goals for the students' next writing seminars. This semester, I decided that having my students describe and try to meet a set of writing goals *before* the end of the semester would give them a further chance to review English 187—this time, focusing on its writing component. I also wanted my students to have a clear, specific sense of what they would try to accomplish as they crafted their final essays for the course. If they had a strong sense of their writing goals and priorities before they started writing the final essay, I reasoned, not only would my students find it easier to address these goals and priorities through structuring their time effectively and through asking for help when necessary, but they would also be better able to assess their accomplishments both as their essays were developing and also when they were finished. When my students reached the peer review stage, they were able to attach a copy of their Essay 5 writing goals to their drafts, and their peer reviewers were able to address those writing goals directly. Finally, I hoped that a clearer self-assessment at the end of the semester would lead my students more strongly into their future writing courses and experiences.

I built a timetable into the Essay 5 revision as one of the final stages in my semester-long endeavor to teach my students that writing is a process—one which they can break down into

components and tackle gradually. For earlier essay assignments, I had effectively given my students an essay-writing process, including evidence-gathering and provisional-theory-making assignments as early steps in the production of Essays #1-4. Now, because each of my students was writing on a different topic with different requirements, and because each of them would be setting different goals for him- or herself, *and* because Thanksgiving Break fell right in the middle of the Essay 5 / Essay 6 sequence, I required them to craft their own timetables so that they wouldn't lose sight of any tasks they needed to accomplish in order to produce solid final essays. I also hoped that these timetables would give my students further (and necessary) practice in structuring their time carefully and deliberately when embarking on lengthy, complicated writing or academic projects—especially in the midst of preparing for last rounds of prelims and final exams.

## **“Essay” #5 (continued): Moving Beyond Wallowing**

In order to produce your revision of “Essay” #5 for Friday, November 16, complete the following three tasks:

### **Task One: Decide on your topic, and describe it more fully.**

If you listed several possible topics in your topic proposal’s rough draft, now is the time to settle on one of them (or, if appropriate, to shape some combination of your ideas into a single, feasible topic). What central questions or ideas will your topic address? What course materials will you examine? What supplementary materials (whether cinematic, textual, or musical) will you explore? If you have a provisional theory or working thesis which might focus your further reflections, include that theory or thesis in your revision, as well. As always, though, remember that provisional theories and working theses will almost necessarily change, becoming more complicated and more responsive to the data you collect and examine, as your essays develop.

### **Task Two: Set three writing goals for Essay #6.**

Take this opportunity to think back over your course writings from this semester. What problems have you tackled in your own writing? Which elements of your writing are strongest at this point? Which elements of your writing do you still need to strengthen? Based on your own reflections, on your peer reviewers’ comments on Essays #2-4, and on my comments on your writings, set three writing goals you’ll try to meet in the process of completing Essay #6. At least one of these goals should be structural or conceptual; at least one of them should be stylistic. An appropriate structural/conceptual goal might be to craft a beautifully sharp and precise thesis and to ensure that you make that thesis felt through a series of strong topic sentences. Describe your writing goals, your motivation for those writing goals, and your strategies for meeting them.

### **Task Three: Create a timetable for producing Essay #6.**

You already have a couple of deadlines for Essay #6: the peer review draft is due on Thursday, November 29, and the final draft is due by 4 p.m. on Friday, December 7. Beyond these deadlines, however, it’s up to you to determine the component parts of your evidence-gathering and essay-writing process, as well as when you’ll need to complete these component parts in order to produce a finished draft and then a final essay. If you’re reviewing a novel we’ve read earlier in the semester, be sure to include that activity in your timetable. If you need to watch one or more film versions of a novel, when will you accomplish that task? If your writing goals require that you perform targeted revisions or editing processes, make time for those activities. Be realistic in scheduling your time: if you don’t want to work on your essay while you’re on Thanksgiving Break, then don’t schedule deadlines for yourself during Thanksgiving Break. Your objective here should be to set realistic goals which you can meet and which will help you move systematically and efficiently toward a strong and punctually submitted Essay #6.

**Submit your revision of “Essay” #5—including “finalized” topic description, writing goals, and project timetable—to me via e-mail by the end of Friday, November 16.**

By the time my students left for Thanksgiving Break, then, each had created a finalized topic proposal which clearly delineated not only what s/he would write Essay 6 about but also how s/he would use Essay 6 to review and strengthen crucial writing skills and when s/he would tackle and complete each of the essay process's component parts. I, in turn, had a list of the topics about which I would be reading when I received the final essays on December 7—topics which included an analysis of how Victorian transportation developments shaped our course texts; a reading of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* through the lens of Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit*; a comparison of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with two very different productions—one on Broadway, one at a Catholic high school—of the musical *Jekyll and Hyde*; a discussion of how Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) interrogate the category of "human"; and a reading of the role played by biblical imagery and characterization in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Stoker's *Dracula*. In fact, several of my students chose to explore some facet of *Dracula*, which seemed to be the class's favorite course text and about which none of them had had a previous opportunity to write.

Once my students had revised their Essays 5, I stepped back and let them work on researching for and developing their essays. I communicated to the class that I would be eminently available for consultation either via e-mail or in person but that, in the interest of allowing them to work and think independently, I would keep myself out of their writing processes at this stage unless they solicited my help.

Between November 29 and December 4, my students read and reviewed their peers' essays. I have come to rely on carefully designed peer review exercises. They make it possible for every student to receive the detailed feedback I would like to offer on all of their draft writings but simply do not have time to provide; more importantly, though, they teach my students (and remind me) that I am not the only reader who can offer them useful feedback about their writing. In other words, by requiring that my students take authoritative stances toward their peers' writings, peer review exercises end up dispersing authority and expertise throughout my classes, teaching my students how to ask for—and provide—constructive criticism of written work.

This semester, as a result of my former students' nearly unanimous praise of peer reviews, I incorporated a peer review into every major essay's assignment sequence; by late November, then, my students were well-accustomed to reading their peers' work. The Essay 6

peer review questionnaire allowed my students to communicate to each other their concerns about their works' current strengths and weaknesses; each student answered a pair of self-assessment questions and also attached Essay 5's writing goals to the Essay 6 rough draft. The Essay 6 peer review was especially important because many of my students were writing about musical and cinematic texts with which their classmates were unfamiliar. From their peer reviewers, student writers were able to ascertain whether they had provided enough contextualizing detail and/or judicious summary to make their arguments both interesting and intelligible to an only partially informed audience. Furthermore, my students knew that the last week of our course would center on oral presentations; I thus included a final peer review question aimed at helping my students identify potential emphases or points of interest for those oral presentations. My students completed this peer review, like the majority of their peer reviews this semester, out of class; in the classroom, we concluded our reading and discussion of *Dracula* on November 29.



## Peer Review Questions for Essay #6

*Please answer the following questions in legible and complete sentences.*

### A. Statement of Progress / Reader's Guide

1. What aspect(s) of your essay do you currently feel most confident about?
2. What aspect(s) of your paper do you feel most confident about wanting/needing to change or improve? What plans do you already have for changing or improving those aspects of your essay?

*Attach your answers to these questions, along with your Essay #5 writing goals, to your essay and exchange with another member of the class.*

### B. Reader Response / Review

1. How does your peer introduce his or her essay? Does this introduction succeed in engaging your interest and making you want to continue reading? Do you feel that you understand what the essay will discuss? Has your peer's introduction provided enough background or introductory information about his or her topic? If not, at what *specific* points do you need more information from your peer?
2. What is the paper's **thesis**? Does it present an *argument*? Is it clearly stated and effectively placed? Does the thesis give you a sense of how the paper will undertake this argument (in terms of organization, sub-arguments, etc.)?
3. Overall, does this essay's **organization** seem clear, effective, and appropriate? Is the essay's thesis present as a guiding force throughout the essay? If not, where do you feel that it should be more present? How else might the essay's overall organization be made stronger? If you sense the essay's organization going astray at any point, mark that point on the paper.
4. Now consider each paragraph of the essay. Does each paragraph consist of a coherent and clearly stated idea or argument? Does each sentence in a paragraph seem to *belong* in that paragraph? Does each paragraph feature logical and smooth transitions both within itself and also between itself and other paragraphs? Mark on the essay any specific places where paragraphs (or individual sentences within them) seem to stray from their topics or where stronger transitions or connections are necessary within or between paragraphs.
5. Does each paragraph use enough **evidence** or **textual detail** to convince you of the point it's making? Overall, do you feel that your peer's essay offers enough detail from the materials which it discusses? Where does your peer seem to need more (or, perhaps, *less*) textual evidence (whether from novel, film, musical recording, or secondary textual source)? Mark any points at which your comprehension of your peer's argument is either hindered or helped by his or her use of evidence or detail.
6. How does this essay end? How does its **conclusion** relate to the essay as a whole? Does this conclusion seem successful? Why or why not? If the current conclusion doesn't seem successful, what might be a more effective choice? Even if it *is* successful, how could it be made even more so?

7. Consider your peer's essay in light of his or her self-evaluation and writing goals for Essay #6. Do you agree with your peer's assessment of where the essay is right now, as well as of where it needs to be strengthened before next Friday? What suggestions can you offer to help your peer achieve his or her writing goals? Do you see specific points in the essay on which your peer should focus to address one or another of these goals?
8. What elements of this essay's central argument and detailed development would you recommend that your peer consider emphasizing in his or her oral presentation next week? If sections of your peer's essay have really engaged you, mark and comment on those sections and their appeal to you as a reader and potential listener; these comments may help your peer gain a sense of what might especially interest the class as a whole.

I had never included oral presentations in my first-year writing seminars before this semester, but even as I was designing English 187, I knew that I wanted to incorporate at least one such presentation. In the end, I incorporated two different kinds of spoken-word exercises. For two weeks in November (November 6-15), while they were writing and revising their topic proposals through Essay 5, pairs of my students took turns running our class discussions of *Dracula*. I timed these student-led discussions to begin during the week I assigned Essay 5 in order to reinforce my students' sense that they were eminently capable of structuring their own intellectual experiences and of intellectually stimulating themselves and their classmates. These student-led discussions afforded my students the opportunity to take full responsibility for our seminar's conduct—for considering what elements of each reading assignment their classmates would need and want to talk about, as well as for strategizing about how to start and sustain conversations about a Victorian novel at 8:40 a.m. At every turn in designing the guidelines for my student-led discussions, I followed a model developed and fine-tuned by David Agruss of the Department of Comparative Literature. Both David's model and my adaptation of it for my own course require discussion leaders to submit questions or agendas to the whole class (via the instructor) far enough in advance of their discussions to allow their classmates time for studied reflection on those questions or agendas. In my course, the student-led discussions of *Dracula* helped me gradually and deliberately to cede control to my students of not only their writing processes but also their classroom space, as the semester began drawing to a close.

The final oral presentation's goals were somewhat different from those of the student-led discussions, though these two assignments shared the aim of giving my students practice in organizing their ideas in preparation for spoken presentation, as well as in considering an audience's needs and in presenting materials orally in a patient, flexible, and assured manner. The Essay 5 / Essay 6 sequence encouraged each student to use the course as a jumping-off place and to branch out from the class's store of common knowledge, into a topic on which s/he would become our resident expert. The oral presentation associated with Essay 6, then, gave these resident experts a chance to teach each other—to share their expertise by giving mini-lectures where they had, in November, led seminar discussions—and, in some cases, to entice their classmates toward further exploration after the course's conclusion. The oral presentation also allowed each student to enlarge the common knowledge built up by the semester's discussions.

## Guidelines for Student-Led Discussions

For the next two weeks, the majority of our class time will be student-led. Two students will be leading class discussion, while I will expect everyone else to contribute to class by preparing for and participating actively in these student-led discussions. In other words, our student-led class sessions should be group efforts; continue bringing to class your questions and comments about the reading assignment. After two-thirds of a semester spent closely examining various aspects of nineteenth-century fictions, we will now work rigorously as a group on one last, fairly compendious novel, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, seeking to use discussion and debate to understand what this novel is saying, as well as *how* it's saying what it's saying—how it constructs meaning through certain kinds of logic, imagery, characterization, belief-structures, narrative patterns or structures, ideas, concepts, echoes, or apparent contradictions. You should feel free to draw connections between *Dracula* and other novels we've read for this course.

### THE SCHEDULE:

#### November 6

- 1)
- 2)

#### November 13

- 1)

#### November 8

- 1) /
- 2)

#### November 15

- 1)
- 2)

### THE GUIDELINES:

On any given day, your pairs may work together or independently to lead discussion. In other words, on November 6, Gail, Ikea, Jens, and Eduardo might choose to integrate their topics for discussion, focusing on a set of agreed-upon topics but splitting the reading assignment in half so that Gail and Ikea guide discussion on a certain page range, while Jens and Eduardo take responsibility for another. Or, you might decide on a particular topic and divide its component parts between the two pairs of discussion leaders for the day. For instance, Anthony, Steven, Diana, and Molly might decide that gender roles are especially intriguing or difficult in the November 8 reading assignment; Anthony and Steven might focus their discussion questions on women's roles in the assignment, while Diana and Molly might focus their questions on men's roles. On the other hand, you may choose to keep your pairs' work independent (just make sure that all four of you aren't coming in with identical passages and questions!). The class time (or sixty minutes of it, anyway) is yours to shape as you see fit.

By **3 p.m. on the day before your class discussion**, one member of each pair should e-mail me a list of four or five questions or topics for your part of the class discussion. You may choose to focus all of your questions on a particularly complicated topic which you feel to be central to the day's reading assignment. Or you may choose to raise a number of topics which seem to be competing for your attention in the assignment. Whatever your strategy or chosen focus, though, you should ground your questions and topics in the **specific parts of your section** of *Dracula* which strike you as being important for any number of reasons—passages which seem crucial to understanding a given reading assignment because they illuminate ideas, themes, concepts, narrative patterns or structures, characterizations, and so on; passages which seem confusing or incomprehensible to you and which you'd like to untangle with the class; a series of passages containing similar imagery, language, narrative strategies, or patterns which create and affect the novel's meaning.

In other words, your questions should refer specifically to *Dracula* (and, if necessary, to other novels we've read in this course or even to supplementary materials contained in your edition's appendices). The questions you e-mail to me the day before your class session should include full quotations, cited properly, from the passages which you'd like the class to discuss.

Once I've received your questions, I will read through them, comment on or react to them as necessary, and e-mail them to the class by 6 p.m. the night before class discussion is to take place. Everyone in the class will thus have the chance to read your agenda for class discussion thoughtfully and thoroughly. If you are not leading class discussion on a given day, you should note (preferably in writing) your reactions and responses to your classmates' discussion topics in order to prepare fully for discussion the next morning. Everyone's input will be crucial if we are to explore a diverse range of ideas. Your full preparation will also demonstrate your support for your classmates; it can be very uncomfortable to sit at a table of silent people at 9 a.m.

As a student leader of our class's discussions, your job will *not* be to lecture or to read to us from your notes on Stoker's novel. Your job will be to introduce topics and questions which intrigue you and then to follow and guide your classmates as discussion develops. To open discussion, start your classmates off with one of your topics, and then go with the flow. You'll need to listen carefully to your classmates and then do your best to link others' comments with your own sense of what's important about the topics and questions you're raising—your own sense, in other words, of the issues which are important to you in a given *Dracula* reading assignment. In other words, you should strive to maintain a balance between synthesizing others' ideas and continuing to present your own. Relate others' questions and comments to your own questions, and, as the discussion develops, relate your own ongoing questions to the questions and comments being raised by the class. **This exercise will require you to be flexible and patient** (both with your classmates and with yourself), to demand clear and precise responses from your classmates, and to keep the class grounded in the novel and not speaking only in general terms about its contents. Don't be reluctant to ask a classmate to expand on a comment or to locate a passage which illustrates his or her point. In this assignment as a whole, you should dare to raise challenging and complicated questions—both in the agenda that you prepare before class starts and also during class itself, as your classmates respond (sometimes in unexpected ways!) to the questions and topics you raise.



## Oral Presentation of Essay #6 Discoveries (December 4-6)

We will devote most of our final week's class meetings to a series of short (i.e., approximately four to five minute) oral presentations. Your oral presentations of your Essay #6 findings, conclusions, and discoveries—or even your essays' unresolvable questions, should you encounter them—will serve several functions. Because your essay topics deal with every novel we've read in this course, these oral presentations will help us, as a class, to review what we've read and contemplated this semester and, in some cases, to grasp hitherto unnoticed connections between our course readings. Because many of your essays deal with cinematic or musical texts which with many members of the class will be unfamiliar, your presentations will also introduce us to particular transformations of the fictions we've read in this course, thereby giving us a sense of what we might want to view or listen to if we simply haven't gotten enough of ENGL 187 and want to continue exploring the questions it's raised. Finally, compiling your oral presentations will require you to think critically about how to use a relatively short amount of speaking time to represent your writing.

To that end, I'd suggest that you read Chapter 50 of your *New St. Martin's Handbook* (645-651), which discusses Making Oral Presentations. Chapter 50 offers useful guidelines for thinking about your presentation's audience and purpose, as well as for preparing and making your presentation.

I will not require you to craft a *specific kind* of written script for your presentation, but I do expect you to have prepared some sort of written material to use as you speak. You may wish to write out your full text and read it to the class; you may wish to boil your presentation down into notes and speak from them. Both of these kinds of speaking texts may be useful to you in future speaking situations; I have found being able to speak from notes an especially useful skill. If you write out a full text, be aware that one page of double-spaced, 12 pt. text (app. 250 words) takes about two minutes to read; the text of your presentation will thus need to be about two or two and a half typed pages.

Your presentation should include an explanation of your essay's argument. Imagine that you've all said to each other, "Hey, what did you write *your* paper about?" and set about answering that question. You shouldn't feel the need to be overly formal; a colloquial or conversational style is fine for the purposes of this assignment. Remember that you're speaking chiefly to your peers, sharing what you've discovered—whether about our course texts or about transformations of them. Your presentation should also include an account of your essay's high points, its most crucial pieces of evidence or most illuminating sub-arguments, in order to further your explanation of the essay's overall argument. Don't feel that you have to compose your entire presentation from scratch; you may well be able to piece together selections from your essay's draft, as long as you keep yourself attentive to the kinds of shifts in sentence structure and argumentation necessary when you shift to writing a speaking text which is meant to be *heard*, not *read*, by your audience. Your sentences will probably need to be shorter and simpler than usual; your verbs will need to be especially strong and clear; your subjects and verbs will need to reside close to one another; and your transitions will need to be obvious.



By the time we reached the end of the Essay 5 / Essay 6 sequence, my students had developed their topics to points far beyond what a cursory glance at that vague Essay 6 assignment would seem to require. Because the end of the semester is such a harried time (especially for first-semester first-year students) and because this sequence had involved so many components, I provided my students with a checklist of the materials they needed to submit on December 7 with their final drafts of Essay 6.

I also used this checklist to communicate the requirements for the final self-assessment component of Essay 6. As a counterpart to the revised Essay 5's writing goals, this self-assessment required my students to reflect critically on their essays' aims and accomplishments. I also constructed this self-assessment assignment to encourage my students to think ahead to future writing situations, whether in Cornell seminars or elsewhere, so that they could identify the writing strategies which, having proven useful this semester, might also be beneficial in those future situations. As I've already noted, this self-assessment took the place of previous semesters' self-evaluating portfolio introductions, in which I have encouraged my students to reflect on the progress they have made as writers during my courses. I have incorporated some such self-assessment exercise into the conclusion of each of my courses in order to allow my students to reinforce for themselves the skills and knowledges they have gained during a semester of reading and writing under my guidance. The more confidently and clearly they can explain their skills and knowledges, the more likely they are to retain those skills and knowledges for future use.

## Checklist for Submission of Essay #6

By 4 p.m. on Friday, December 7, please place the following materials in my departmental mailbox (252 Goldwin Smith).

- ☐ Your original Essay #5
- ☐ Your revision of Essay #5 (with writing goals and timetable)
- ☐ Your peer review draft of Essay #6, with peer review report
- ☐ Your oral presentation script or notes
- ☐ Your final draft of Essay #6
- ☐ A self-assessment of approximately one typed, double-spaced page (though you should feel free to use more than one page if you'd like). This self-assessment should reflect both on Essay #6 and also on the overall process of designing and executing this essay. How has your essay fulfilled the expectations you established in Essay #5? How successful were your endeavors to meet your writing goals? If you feel that you only partially achieved one or more of your writing goals, you may use this self-assessment to speculate about how you might regroup and address that goal or goals in your writing seminar next semester or (if ENGL 187 is your last seminar) in your future writing. Which elements of the Essay #5 / Essay #6 sequence might you use in future writing projects? Which elements seemed less valuable as you drafted and revised this essay? And, in the end, how well do you feel Essay #6 represents your work in this course?

I hope that this self-assessment will allow you to consider not only what (and how) you've written for this essay but also what you've learned about your writerly self over the course of this semester—for instance, about the strengths and weaknesses of your writing or about the activities and settings most crucial to your writing process. What skills and knowledge do you hope to build on or strengthen in your writing seminar next semester? What writerly behaviors have you found helpful enough to want to keep in your writing repertoire?

When I first designed the topic proposal / final essay sequence in Fall 1998, I wasn't entirely certain that it would accomplish my aims in creating it. The sequence felt very experimental, very loose, even a bit strange. Without knowing it, the student who called the brainstorming exercises "that Jedi follow-your-instincts stuff" put his finger on what I, myself, was doing when I crafted this sequence: pressed for time because of an unforeseen departure from Ithaca, I had no choice but to follow my instincts toward what I sensed might help strengthen my students' abilities and remedy some of their weaknesses. This semester, I toyed with the idea of having my students continue "practicing" their standard essay-writing, rather than proposing and executing their own topics, since, as I've already noted, they seemed to be having more difficulty with basic essay concepts than some of my past classes have had. However, I followed my instincts once again and proceeded with this time-tested sequence as originally scheduled. And, once again, I have been pleasantly surprised by both the writing processes and the final written products which the sequence has yielded.

Indeed, semester after semester, I have found the proof of this sequence's success in the essays my students have produced in response to it, as well as in their praise of its various components. This semester, in their self-assessments, many of my students declared their now-established faith in and reliance on several components of the Essay 5 / Essay 6 writing process. "I think starting rough and revising is an excellent strategy for me and I will use it in the future," one student wrote, continuing, "I really liked having a peer review...and will definitely have someone review my essays in the future. I really like having people read my essay to get an outside view, especially in class with no bias." Another student declared, "I liked this idea of first drafting an essay proposal and then writing my essay. In my writing seminar for next semester, I will try to do that for each of my essays, even though the teacher might not require us to do that." "For me," yet another student asserted, "the best tool for completing an essay is the rough draft. The rough draft allows me to get started and have a free flow of ideas." And perhaps my favorite response: "In the future I hope to continue using timetables for my major projects. This process eliminated a lot of stress and prevented me from hurting myself and my work by procrastinating too much." Ultimately, in my course, I'm helping young minds to mature—to become more flexible, more rigorous, more patient, more curious, more daring. After several semesters, I consider this topic proposal / final essay sequence to be a crucial part of the pedagogical repertoire that helps me facilitate my students' intellectual growth.